DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 981 CS 502 698

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TITLE Dogmatism, Intelligence, and the Understanding/Appreciation of Editorial Satire.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Conference on Humor (2nd, Los Angeles, CA, August 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Dogmatism; Higher Education; *Humor; *Intelligence; *Persuasive Discourse; *Reading Comprehension; Research; *Satire; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

In a study of satire as persuasion, two experiments were conducted--one to determine whether dogmatism affected the understanding and appreciation of editorial satire, the second to determine the same about intelligence as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test. In the first experiment, 116 college students read three satirical editorials. After reading each satire, each subject checked one statement from a list of five that he or she thought was the author's thesis. Each also rated the satire on a seven-step semantic-differential scale ranging from "extremely funny" to "extremely unfunny." Finally, each subject responded to a ten-item dogmatism scale. The same procedures were used in the second experiment, which involved 59 students. In this experiment, the subjects also read three editorial satires. Their verbal and quantitative scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test obtained from school records. Data from the two experiments suggest that both dogmatism and intelligence affect understanding and appreciation of satire, but in ways more complicated than are currently known. (FL)

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DOGMATISM, INTELLIGENCE, AND THE UNDERSTANDING/APPRECIATION OF EDITORIAL SATIRE

Paper Presented at The Second International Conference on Humor, August, 1979, Los Angeles

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Studies of satire as persuasion have discovered that many people often do not understand the serious point of many satires.[1] Others studies have focused on why satire is so often misunderstood as to thesis. Kendall found that both years of schooling and youthfulness were positively related to satire understanding.[2] Gruner found that political partisanship was related to the understanding of editorial satire.[3] Surlin found that dogmatism was a factor in how television viewers react to characters in tv's "All In The Family,"[4] and Miller and Bacon discovered that dogmatism was also negatively related to speed of recognizing the "point" in a risqué Playboy cartoon.[5] An early study by Cooper and Jahoda revealed that prejudiced people erect an array of psychological defense mechanisms to prevent their understanding of humorous or serious anti-bigotry messages.[6]

These studies prompted the two experiments reported here, one to determine whether dogmatism affects the understanding and/or appreciation of editorial satire, the second to determine the same about intelligence as measured by the Scholastic Aptitude Test.

Experiment 1. Dogmatism

Procedures. Subjects (Ss) were 116 speech students at the University of Georgia in 1973. They read one satirical editorial by Art Buchwald and two by Art Hoppe. The Buchwald piece, "Nixon's Shoes," appeared June 12, 1973 in the Atlanta Journal; it ridiculed then-president Nixon for his illegal actions regarding the "Watergate Affair." Hoppe's "The George and Tom Papers" ridiculed George McGovern for being less than honest and candid over the "Eagleton Affair," and was published in the Atlanta Constitution August 10, 1973. His "SANE Capital Punishment" satirized the idea that capital punishment deters murders; it appeared in the (Lincoln) Daily Nebraskan April 24, 1967.

The satires were duplicated by offset and assembled in three different arrangements to avoid an "order effect." They were stacked and handed out to the Ss in random order. After reading each satire a S was to check which one statement from a list of five was the thesis intended by the satire's author. (Authors' intended theses were obtained by writing them. CRG) Each S was also to rate each satire on a 7-step semantic differential-type scale bounded by "extremely funny" and "extremely unfunny." After reading and responding to each satire the subjects responded to a short-form, 10-item dogmatism scale developed by Troldahl and Powell.[7]

Results. Dogmatism scores of the 116 Ss were divided into four groups, those correctly perceiving none of the satirical theses (0-gp), those correctly perceiving one of the three (1-gp), those correct on two (2-gp), and those correct on all three (3-gp). These four sets of dogmatism scores were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance to produce the data in Table 1. As predicted, the average dogmatism score increases in accordance with inability to recognize satirical theses. These data strongly suggest that dogmatism was a factor in the understanding of these satires.

To see if dogmatism affected understanding of each individual editorial, the data were separated by satire and analyzed by t-test to produce the data in Table 2.

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Table 1
Dogmatism Scores of Four Groups

	3-gp	2-gp	1-gp	0-gp	
n:	15	33	47	21	F = 4.08
Mean Dogmatism Score:	27.40	32.12	33.00	34.19	p < .01

Table 2
Dogmatism Means for Each Particular Editorial

Editorial	Those Perceiving		Those not Perceiving		Difference	t	p
	Mean	n	Mean	n			
Nixon's Shoes	30.55	70	34.00	46	3.45	2.55	< .02
SANE Cap. Pun.	30.07	32	32.55	84	2.48	1.63	< .10
George and Tom	31.10	60	32.91	56	1.81	1.35	NS

As the data immediately above show, the differences in mean scores for all three satires is in the hypothesized direction, but in only one case (Nixon's Shoes) was the difference statistically significant. For "SANE Capital Punishment" the difference approached significance. It would appear that dogmatism affects the understanding of satires differentially.

Another comparison of high- and low-dogmatics was made. Ss were divided into a group of low dogmatics scoring one standard deviation below the mean ($\bar{X}$ = 32.25) and one of 29 high-dogmatics scoring one s.d. above the mean. These groups were sub-divided according to whether they did or did not correctly perceive a satire's thesis. Data were anlyzed by chi-square to produce that in Table 3.

Table 3
Chi-square Analysis of Thesis Perception
by High and Low Dogmatics

Editorial:	Nixon's Shoes		George & Tom		SANE Cap. Pun.	
Dogmatism gp.:	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Number of Ss who:						
did perceive:	15	19	14	15	8	8
did not perceive:	14	4	15	8	21	15
	x^2 = 5.41		x^2 = 1.46		x^2 = .31	
	p < .02		NS		NS	

These data show that only in the case of the anti-Nixon editorial was high or low dogmatism not independent of thesis perception. The low-dogmatics perceived the anti-Nixon thesis significantly more often than did the high-dogmatics.

Humor ratings of each of the three editorials by the four groups as determined above (high-dogmatics who perceived thesis, high-dogmatics who did not; low-dogmatics who perceived thesis, low-dogmatics who did not) were subjected to one-way analyses of variance. Only the ratings of "Nixon's Shoes" were found to differ significantly

($F = 5.41$, $p < .02$). Comparing means 2 at a time by the Scheffé method revealed two significant differences: low-dogmatics/perceiving rated the humor higher than did the high-dogmatics/not perceiving ($F = 9.26$) and higher, also, than did the high-dogmatics/perceiving ($F = 8.38$).

Discussion. The usual cautions in generalizing from the data of this experiment are in order, plus special note that the "funniness" scale used was a single 7-step scale and the short-form dogmatism scale, while economical of time, suffers in sensitivity and reliability by its shortness. But it would seem that the following conclusions are tentatively supported by this study:

1. Ability to perceive correctly the theses of satires differing in subject matter seems to be related to low dogmatism.
2. The chi-square evidence hints that dogmatism might interact with satire topic in determining ability to perceive satirical intent. Dogmatism seems to have affected perception of the "Nixon's Shoes" thesis most; perhaps high dogmatism causes one more to distort information about a "conservative" figure such as Mr. Nixon?
3. Appreciation of satire as denoted by humor ratings seems to result from an interaction of dogmatism and satirical topic. It is obvious that more research in this area is needed.

Experiment 2. Intelligence

Procedures. This experiment used the same procedures as did Experiment 1, with a few differences. Speech students ($n = 59$) in Winter Quarter, 1978, served as Ss. Hoppe's "SANE Capital Punishment" was used again, but the other two stimuli were different satires by Buchwald. His "Upping Prison Requirements" (as reprinted in his The Establishment is Alive and Well in Washington, Fawcett, 1970) ridiculed then-governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, for one of his press conference statements on prison reform: "We're doing the best we can, and before we do much better, we're going to have to get a better grade of prisoner." Buchwald's "Try to Find the Perfect Employee" (Atlanta Journal, 5-25-75) lambasted the government's interference in the hiring practices of private businesses. The Ss' SAT verbal and quantitative scores were secured from the Admission Office's placement report.

Results. One-way analyses of variance were compted on the SAT verbal and quantitative scores of the Ss as divided into the four groups based upon how many satire theses were correctly perceived. For each satire a t-test was run to compare the humor ratings for those who did and those who did not check the correct thesis (to determine if understanding of thesis affects enjoyment of the satire). Pearson r's were then computed between SAT scores and humor ratings of the satires.

Table 4 has the results of the ANOVA on understanding of satires and intelligence. Group 0 comprised Ss not correct on any one of the three satires; Group 1 Ss were correct on 1 of 3, etc. Mean SAT verbal scores rise regularly from group 0 to group 3, differences statistically dependable. The same does not hold true for SAT quantitative scores, as expected.

Table 4
Comparison of SAT Mean Scores of Four Groups

Group:	0	1	2	3	
--Ni--	4	16	24	15	
Mean SAT verbal	400	458	470	537	$F = 3.69$, $p < .05$
Mean SAT quantitat.	475	546	523	526	$F = .98$, NS

Table 5 compares the mean funniness rating of each satire by those who did and those who did not understand the satire. The only signficant difference occurs on ratings of one satire, "Try to Find the Perfect Employee."

Table 5
Mean Funniness Ratings by Those Understanding and Not Understanding the Satires

	Understanding		Not Understanding		t
Satire	Mean	n	Mean	n	
Try to Find . . .	5.058	52	3.429	7	2.76, $p < .01$
SANE Cap. Pun.	5.200	20	4.974	39	.85 NS
Upping Prison Req.	5.622	37	5.364	22	.97 NS

Table 6 shows the correlations between the verbal SAT scores and the funniness ratings of each satire. Again, only for "Try to Find . . ." was there a statistically significant result.

Table 3
Pearson r's Between Verbal Scores and Funniness Ratings

Satire:	r	Significance
Try to Find . . .	.273	$p < .05$
SANE Cap. Pun	.246	$.05 < p < .10$
Upping Prison Req.	-.115	NS

Discussion. It appears obvious from the data of Table 4 that the effect of verbal intelligence, as measured by the SAT (even in the restricted range of those admitted to a major university by those scores) is related to the ability to correctly perceive the intended theses of editorial satires.

The data in Table 5 indicate that ability to correctly perceive the intended thesis was related to greater appreciation of satire in one case but not dependably so in two others. A tentative conclusion might be that whether understanding a satire's point affects appreciation of that satire depends upon the content (and, maybe the style) of the satire and its interaction with the reader's previous attitudes and knowledge regarding that content.

The data in Table 6 suggest that verbal intelligence is slightly related to the appreciation of some satires, depending upon the satirical subject matter and/or style of presentation. For one satire, intelligence was slightly (but statistically significantly) related to satire appreciation; in a second it was slightly less related and not quite significantly, statistically (at the .05 level for a two-tailed test, where perhaps the one-tailed test would be more appropriate, making $p < .05$). In a third satire, the two variables were negatively (but not significantly) related.

Of interest is the fact that in each experiment the allegedly causal variable (dogmatism or verbal intelligence) reacted with the satires differentially according to the satire's topic and/or style. In Experiment 1 dogmatism was mostly prominently a factor in understanding and appreciation of "Nixon's Shoes," and in Experiment 2 the understanding/appreciation of only "Try to Find the Perfect Employee" was significantly linked to verbal intelligence. In another study, a masters thesis directed by this writer, no connection was found, for instance, between dogmatism and thesis understanding (that student and I both think it was because of the nature of the satirical content

used). And, of course, since the subject matter of some of these satires is topical, one might expect the results reported here to fluctuate over time. It is probable that more sophisticated experimental designs will have to be employed in the future to take into account the various interactions among the variables of interest and the variables of satire topic, style, and timelessness of subject matter. Another factor which may have to be allowed for in future research is difficulty of understanding a particular satire. For instance, note that fewer than half the Ss were correct on "SANE Capital Punishment" whereas well over half were correct on the other satires.

It is the writer's belief, based upon the data in this paper and conclusions from other studies, that both dogmatism and intelligence affect understanding and appreciation of satire, but in ways more complicated than we know at this time.

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[2]Unpublished field study, Spring, 1973, Albany, New York.

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[8]E-Ni Wang, Source Credibility, Sex, Dogmatism, and the Understanding/Appreciation of Satires, M.A. Thesis, The University of Georgia, 1978. This thesis is available through inter-library loan.